

DEATH PENALTY (CRIJ 4360.004)

Term: Fall 2026

Course Dates: August 24 – December 12, 2026

Professor: Dr. Jennifer Wooldridge

Course Times: T/TH 12:30pm – 1:50pm WTB 236

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Office Hours: Tuesday/Thursday 9:30-11:00am (in-person and Zoom) or by appointment

Course Overview

This course provides a comprehensive exploration of capital punishment in the United States, emphasizing advanced analysis of its legal, empirical, and ethical dimensions. Students will critically examine the historical development of death penalty statutes, the constitutional framework established through landmark Supreme Court decisions, and the evolving standards of justice that define its modern application. The course also interrogates wrongful convictions and death row exonerations through the lenses of forensic reliability, prosecutorial discretion, and systemic bias. Drawing on interdisciplinary scholarship and contemporary case studies, students will evaluate the role of innocence organizations, legislative reforms, and public opinion in shaping the future of capital punishment. Emphasis is placed on critical evaluation of legal doctrine, data-driven policy analysis, and scholarly research contributing to evidence-based reform in the administration of justice.

Student Learning Outcomes

By the end of this course, undergraduate students will be able to:

- **Describe** the historical and legal development of the death penalty in the United States.
- **Explain** the impact of key Supreme Court decisions and legislative actions shaping capital punishment policy.
- **Analyze** wrongful conviction cases to understand contributing factors such as error, bias, or misconduct.
- **Evaluate** arguments for and against the use of the death penalty from legal, moral, and social perspectives.
- **Apply course concepts** to case studies to demonstrate critical thinking about justice system reform and the protection of the innocent.

Required Textbooks and Readings

- This course is considered an OER/no-cost course. All of the course readings and materials will be provided, at no cost, on Canvas.
- Students will need an electronic device for classes as they will submit activities during class.
- **Total Course Cost:** \$0

Course Structure

This course utilizes a flipped classroom approach where students will watch online video lectures and prepare ahead of time for the day's activities. On Tuesdays, students will work on activities generally related to the week's discussion topic, and on Thursdays, students will work with their Innocence Project team members on a different segment of their exoneration case file.

Tips for Success in this Course

1. **Participate.** I invite you to engage deeply, ask questions, and talk about the course content with your classmates. You can learn a great deal from discussing ideas and perspectives with your peers and professor. Participation can also help you articulate your thoughts and develop critical thinking skills.
2. **Manage your time.** I get it—students usually juggle a lot, and I know you've got commitments beyond this class. Still, doing your best often means carving out enough dedicated time for coursework. Try scheduling specific blocks of time and ensure you have enough room to finish assignments, allowing extra space for any tech issues that might pop up.
3. **Login regularly.** I recommend that you log in to Canvas several times a week to view announcements, discussion posts and replies to your posts.
4. **Do not fall behind.** This class moves at a quick pace and each week builds on the previous class content. If you feel you are starting to fall behind, check in with the instructor as soon as possible so we can troubleshoot together. It will be hard to keep up with the course content if you fall behind in the pre-work or post-work.
5. **Use Canvas notification settings.** Pro tip! Canvas can ensure you receive timely notifications in your email or via text. Be sure to enable notifications to be sent instantly or daily. ([Canvas Notification Guide](#))
6. **Ask for help if needed.** If you are struggling with a course concept, reach out to me and your classmates for support.

Graded Course Requirements Information

Micro-Lecture Homework Assignments 10 pts per week

Each week, students will complete micro-lecture activities that include short video response questions, comprehension checks, and low-stakes homework reflections. These assignments are designed to reinforce key ideas from the week's lecture material—such as Supreme Court cases, legislative developments, and ethical debates surrounding capital punishment—and to build foundational knowledge for more advanced analysis. Each week's micro-lecture assignments are worth 10 points each and should be completed before the start of class on Tuesdays.

THE INNOCENCE REVIEW UNIT GROUP PROJECT REQUIREMENTS

Throughout the semester, you will work as part of an investigative unit to examine the case of an individual who was wrongfully convicted and sentenced to death. Your group will approach the case as an Innocence Review Unit



charged with reconstructing what happened, evaluating the reliability of the conviction, identifying the factors that contributed to the wrongful conviction, and recommending reforms.

On Tuesdays, you will explore the week's topic through general preparation and applied activities. This work will help you understand the relevant concepts, practice using them, and prepare to apply them to your assigned case during Thursday's Case File Workshop.

During Thursday Case File Workshops, your unit will examine legal records, evidence, institutional decisions, and other case materials to complete a polished investigative deliverable. Group roles will rotate throughout the semester so that every student contributes to multiple aspects of the investigation.

Your weekly work will build toward two major final products:

- A complete Final Investigative Case File containing your unit's revised findings and recommendations.
- An Innocence Review Board Presentation in which your unit formally presents and defends its conclusions.

These assignments are collaborative, but every student is individually responsible for arriving prepared, participating actively, completing assigned responsibilities, and understanding the unit's investigation. Assignments will generally receive a group score; however, individual scores may be adjusted based on preparation, attendance, observed participation, documented contributions, and peer evaluations completed by group members.

By the end of the semester, your group will have completed a comprehensive investigation—not simply a collection of weekly assignments, but a professional case file explaining how a wrongful death sentence occurred, how innocence was ultimately established, and what the criminal justice system can learn from the case.

Tuesday Preparation Workshops (10 pts each)

Each Tuesday, students will complete individual and collaborative activities related to the week's topic. These workshops provide an opportunity to practice applying key concepts, analyze relevant cases or materials, and begin preparing for the Thursday Case File Assignment. Attendance, preparation, and active participation are required to receive credit.

Wrongful Conviction Case File Assignments (20 pts each)

Each Thursday, students will work with their investigative unit to apply the week's course concepts to an assigned wrongful conviction case. Teams will prepare case materials in advance, complete a polished investigative deliverable during class, and submit the required case file documents before leaving. Attendance and active participation are required to receive credit. Although each assignment receives a group score, the instructor may adjust individual scores based on observed participation, preparation, and contribution to the week's activity.

Final Submission (100 pts)

Each investigative unit will submit a complete, polished case file incorporating its revised investigative work from throughout the semester. The final submission will receive a group score; however, individual scores may be adjusted based on instructor observations, documented contributions, and peer evaluations completed by group members.

Final Presentation (50 pts)

Each investigative unit will present its findings and recommendations to the Innocence Review Board. All group members must participate and demonstrate familiarity with the investigation. The presentation will receive a group

score; however, individual scores may be adjusted based on each student's preparation, participation, presentation performance, and peer evaluations.

Peer and Self Evaluations (15 pts)

Students will complete confidential peer and self-evaluations at the midpoint and conclusion of the semester. These evaluations allow group members to document individual preparation, participation, reliability, and contributions to the investigative project. Peer evaluations do not directly determine grades; however, the instructor may use them, together with classroom observations and documented contributions, to adjust an individual student's group-project scores. Evaluations must be specific, professional, and supported by examples.

Grading Structure

Assignment	Points
Micro-Lecture Quizzes	150
Tuesday Preparation Activities	120
Wrongful Conviction Case File Assignments	260
Final Project	100
Final Presentation	50
Peer and Self Evaluations	30
Total	710 pts

Grading Scale

- A - (710 – 639)
- B - (638.5 – 568)
- C - (567.5 – 497)
- D - (496.5 – 426)
- F - (425.5 – below)

Artificial Intelligence (AI) Use:

UT Tyler is committed to exploring and using artificial intelligence (AI) tools as appropriate for the discipline and task undertaken. We encourage discussing AI tools' ethical, societal, philosophical, and disciplinary implications. All uses of AI should be acknowledged as this aligns with our commitment to honor and integrity, as noted in UT Tyler's Honor Code. Faculty and students must not use protected information, data, or copyrighted materials when using any AI tool. Additionally, users should be aware that AI tools rely on predictive models to generate content that may appear correct but is sometimes shown to be incomplete, inaccurate, taken without attribution from other sources, and/or biased.

Consequently, an AI tool should not be considered a substitute for traditional approaches to research. You are ultimately responsible for the quality and content of the information you submit. Misusing AI tools that violate the guidelines specified for this course (see below) is considered a breach of academic integrity. The student will be



subject to disciplinary actions as outlined in UT Tyler's Academic Integrity Policy. For this course, AI is encouraged during the course, and appropriate acknowledgement is expected.

You can use AI programs (ChatGPT, Copilot, etc.) in this course. These programs can be powerful tools for learning and other productive pursuits, including completing assignments in less time, helping you generate new ideas, or serving as a personalized learning tool. However, your ethical responsibilities as a student remain the same. You must follow UT Tyler's Honor Code and uphold the highest standards of academic honesty. This applies to all uncited or improperly cited content, whether created by a human or in collaboration with an AI tool. If you use an AI tool to develop content for an assignment, you must cite the tool's contribution to your work. 2 c.

Late Work and Make-Up Exams:

As a general rule, I do not accept late assignments. I never spring any last-minute assignments on you – from the first day of class, you will know what is due and when it is due to me. It is up to you to plan accordingly as you have ample time to complete these assignments. If you do not turn in your assignments on time, it is a zero in the gradebook and I will not grade the assignment. However, there are always times when I am lenient and will accept the assignment so long that it is submitted before I begin grading. But that's a game of chance on your end 😊

Class attendance is mandatory and work cannot be made up for credit. However, any missed assignments must still be completed as part of your final Innocence Project case file, as applicable. If you have a documented excuse (death in the family, illness, car accident, etc...), you must inform me of your situation within 2 days of the missed assignment and it is mandatory for you to provide documentation to me in order to be eligible for a make-up. Please note that having to work is not an excused absence. While I am sympathetic and understanding to your work schedule, you have made a choice to enroll in this class and it must be considered a priority. First responders and military personnel will receive exemptions from the work policy in this class on an individual basis. Religious holiday are always accepted as exemptions. Pregnant and parenting student policies also apply here as per state law, so long as the student is on record with the university.

Attendance Policy:

As this is an in-person class, you are expected to attend the course, in-person. No Zoom accommodations will be made unless there is paperwork on file with the university. All Applied Assignments must be completed in class for them to count for credit.

University Policies & Student Resources:

University policies and student resources are available on the University website and in Canvas under "Syllabus". (You may copy or print the following information to include in your syllabus or use the links provided below.)

- [University Policy](#)
- [Student Resources](#)

Calendar of Topics, Readings, and Due Dates

CRIJ 4360: Death Penalty & Actual Innocence

Course Schedule – Fall 2026 (August 24 – December 12, 2026)

Week	Dates	Topics & Cases	Readings / Materials	Tuesday/Thursday Activities
1	Aug 24 - 30	Introduction to Capital Punishment	<u>Due before class on Tuesday:</u> <u>Watch:</u> What makes death different? (3 pts) The Supreme Court’s Role in Regulating Death (4 pts) Finality, Error, and the Cost of Getting it Wrong (3 pts) <u>Read:</u> National Registry of Exonerations Death Penalty Information Center Website Innocence Project Website	<u>Tuesday:</u> Syllabus Discussion Introduction to Capital Punishment & Risk of Error Case Assignments and Group Pairings <u>Thursday:</u> Due at the end of class: Section A: Case Intake & Assignment (20 pts)
2	Aug 31 – Sept 6	The 8 th Amendment & “Evolving Standards of Decency”	<u>Due before class on Tuesday:</u> <u>Watch:</u> The Eighth Amendment and the Constitutional Logic of Death (3 pts) Evolving Standards of Decency: The Doctrinal Pivot (4 pts) From Method Regulation to Systemic Scrutiny (3 pts) <u>Read:</u>	<u>Tuesday:</u> Death Penalty Eligibility Lab (10 pts) <u>Thursday:</u> Due at the end of class: Section B: Constitutional Framework (20 pts)

Week	Dates	Topics & Cases	Readings / Materials	Tuesday/Thursday Activities
			<i>Wilkerson v. Utah (1878)</i> <i>In re Kemmler (1890)</i> <i>Trop v. Dulles (1958)</i>	
3	Sept 7 - 13	The Modern Era & Furman v. Georgia (1972)	<u>Due before class on Tuesday:</u> <u>Watch:</u> Before Furman: Discretion without Limits (3 pts) A Court Without Theory (4 pts) The Meaning of Furman: Abolition, Pause, or Warning? (3 pts) <u>Read:</u> <i>Furman v. Georgia (1972)</i> <i>Furman v. Georgia (1972)</i> (visual podcast) Carol Steiker on Furman v. Georgia (Part 1) Carol Steiker on Furman v. Georgia (Part 1)	<u>TUESDAY:</u> Prosecutorial Discretion Simulation (10 pts) <u>THURSDAY:</u> Section C: Charging Decision Review (20 pts)
4	Sept 14 - 20	Reinstatement & Gregg v. Georgia (1976)	<u>Due before class on Tuesday:</u> <u>Watch:</u> After Furman: Rebuilding the Death Penalty Through Procedure (3 pts) Gregg v. Georgia: The Constitutional Blueprint for Reinstatement (4 pts) The Gregg Trilogy: What the Court Allowed – Ad What it Refused (3 pts) <u>Read:</u>	<u>TUESDAY:</u> Anatomy of a Capital Trial Activity (10 pts) <u>THURSDAY:</u> Section D: Capital Trial Review (20 pts)

Week	Dates	Topics & Cases	Readings / Materials	Tuesday/Thursday Activities
			<i>Gregg v. Georgia (1976)</i> <i>Gregg v. Georgia (1976) Explained</i>	
5	Sept 21 - 27	Aggravating & Mitigating Circumstances	<u>Due before class on Tuesday:</u> <u>Watch:</u> Narrowing Death: Aggravating Factors as Constitutional Gatekeepers (3 pts) Proportionality and the Illusion of Consistency (4 pts) Who Decides Death? Juries, Judges, and Constitutional Authority (3 pts) <u>Read:</u> Aggravating Factors by State Federal Capital Offenses: An Overview of Substantive and Procedural Law	<u>TUESDAY:</u> Capital Sentencing Deliberation (10 pts) <u>THURSDAY:</u> Section E: Sentencing Analysis (20 pts)
6	Sept 28 – Oct 4	Race in Capital Sentencing	<u>Due before class on Tuesday:</u> <u>Watch:</u> Race as Risk, Not Intent: How the Court Frames Disparity (3 pts) McCleskey v. Kemp and the Limits of Constitutional Proof (4 pts) The McCleskey Fear: What the Court was Really Protecting (3 pts) <u>Read:</u> <i>McCleskey v. Kemp (1987)</i> <i>McCleskey v. Kemp (1987) Podcast</i> Race and Wrongful Conviction in the United States	<u>TUESDAY:</u> BALDUS! (10 pts) <u>THURSDAY:</u> Section F: Defendant & Community Profile (20 pts)

Week	Dates	Topics & Cases	Readings / Materials	Tuesday/Thursday Activities
7	Oct 5 - 11	Categorical Exclusions & Constitutional Linedrawing	<u>Due before class on Tuesday:</u> <u>Watch:</u> Categorical Exclusions: When Procedure is No Longer Enough (2 pts) Intellectual Disability: From Atkins to Hall (2 pts) Juveniles and Culpability: Roper, Graham and Miller (3pts) Offense-Based Exclusions: Coker, Kennedy, Enmund, and Tison (3 pts) <u>Read:</u> Constitutional Limitations (SCOTUS Cases) Constitutional Exclusions Podcast (Optional)	<u>TUESDAY:</u> Legislative Constitutional Review (10 pts) <u>THURSDAY:</u> Section G: Constitutional Eligibility Review (20 pts)
8	Oct 12 - 18	Last Days, Methods of Execution, & Lethal Injection Litigation	<u>Due before class on Tuesday:</u> <u>Watch:</u> Cruel and Unusual Revisited: Pain, Risk, and the Eighth Amendment (2 pts) Baze v. Rees: The Modern Test for Execution Methods (3 pts) Glossip v. Gross: Burden, Proof, and Judicial Deference (2 pts) Bucklew v. Precythe: Individualized Pain and the Limits of Compassion (3 pts) Last Words: Performance, Silence, and Meaning (2 pts) Last Meals: Control, Comfort, and the Illusion of Choice (3 pts) <u>Read:</u> <i>Baze v. Bees</i> (2008)	<u>TUESDAY:</u> Execution Rituals (10 pts) <u>THURSDAY:</u> Section H: Life on Death Row (20 pts)

Week	Dates	Topics & Cases	Readings / Materials	Tuesday/Thursday Activities
			<i>Glossip v. Gross</i> (2015) DPIC Botched Executions Botched Execution: The Brutal Final 24 Hours of Clayton Lockett What lethal injection feels like (video) Last Meals and Final Statements: Social Science Research on America's Death Row	
9	Oct 19 - 25	The Innocence Movement	<u>Due before class on Tuesday:</u> <u>Watch:</u> The Birth of the Innocence Project (3 pts) Barry Scheck, DNA, and Capital Case Exonerations (2 pts) Limits, Critiques, and the Future of Innocence Work (3 pts) The Texas Innocence Project and Death Row Litigation (2 pts) <u>Read:</u> Cohen (2021) Pain, suffering, and jury awards: A study of the cost of wrongful convictions Actual Innocence: Five Days to Execution by Barry Scheck, Peter Neufeld, and Jim Dwyer (Recommended Read) Scheck & Neufeld (1998) Toward the Formation of "Innocence Commissions" in America	<u>TUESDAY:</u> Innocence Intake Files (10 pts) <u>THURSDAY:</u> Section I: The Innocence Project (20 pts)

Week	Dates	Topics & Cases	Readings / Materials	Tuesday/Thursday Activities
10	Oct 26 – Nov 1	Wrongful Conviction and Conviction Failure Analysis	<u>Due before class on Tuesday:</u> <u>Watch:</u> Finality vs. Accuracy: Why Post-Conviction Review is Different (2 pts) Actual Innocence and Constitutional Core Cass: Herrera v. Collins and Schlup v. Delo (3 pts) What Actual Innocence Means on Death Row (2 pts) Wrongful Executions: When the System Gets it Irreversibly Wrong (3 pts) Exonerations from Death Row (2 pts) The Rise of the innocence Movement (3 pts) <u>Read:</u> Taking Stock of Innocence: Movements, Mountains, and Wrongful Convictions	<u>TUESDAY:</u> No Class on Tuesday <u>THURSDAY:</u> Section J: Conviction Failure Analysis (20 pts)
11	Nov 2 – 8	Establishing Innocence: Forensics, False Confessions, & Eyewitness Error	<u>Due before class on Tuesday:</u> <u>Watch:</u> Forensic Evidence: Science, Certainty, and Capital Convictions (2 pts) False Confessions and the Illusion of Voluntariness (2 pts) Eyewitness Error: Memory, Confidence, and Misidentification (3 pts) When Errors Combine: The Anatomy of a Death Row Conviction (3 pts) <u>Read:</u> The Impact of False or Misleading Forensic Evidence on Wrongful Convictions (NIJ)	<u>TUESDAY:</u> Eyewitness Testimony Activity (10 pts) <u>THURSDAY:</u> Section K: Evidence Reliability Matrix (20 pts)

Week	Dates	Topics & Cases	Readings / Materials	Tuesday/Thursday Activities
			Eyewitness: How Accurate is Visual Memory? Examining the Ronald Cotton Case Summaries of 46 Cases in Which Mistaken or Perjured Eyewitness Testimony Put Innocent Persons on Death Row	
12	Nov 9 - 15	Prosecutorial Misconduct & Defense Inequality	<u>Due before class on Tuesday:</u> <u>Watch:</u> Procedural Justice and the Myth of Equal Process (3 pts) Defense Inequality in Capital Cases (2 pts) Surviving Execution: Willie Francis and Procedural Cruelty (3 pts) What Procedural Misconduct Reveals About Capital Punishment (2 pts) <u>Read:</u> Inadequate Defense – Innocence Project Laws Regarding Capital Representation Legal Representation – Death Penalty Information Center Lethal Indifference: The Fatal Combination of Incompetent Attorneys and Unaccountable Courts in Texas Death Penalty Appeals	<u>TUESDAY:</u> Willie Francis Must Die Again (10 pts) <u>THURSDAY:</u> Section L: Professional Performance Review (20 pts)
13	Nov 16 - 22	Public Opinion, Media, and Political Rhetoric	<u>Due before class on Tuesday:</u> <u>Watch:</u> Public Opinion and the Long Decline of Support (2 pts) Media, Narrative, and the Reframing of Capital Punishment (3 pts)	<u>TUESDAY:</u> Final Project Preparation Day (10 pts) <u>THURSDAY:</u>

Week	Dates	Topics & Cases	Readings / Materials	Tuesday/Thursday Activities
			Public Confidence, Legitimacy, and Disuse (2 pts) Federal Countercurrents: Death Row and Executive Power in Practice (3 pts) <u>Read:</u> 2025 Public Opinion Polls Wrongful Convictions – 60 Minutes Wrongful Convictions: Last Week Tonight with John Oliver	Section M: Professional Performance Review (20 pts)
	Nov 23 – 29		Thanksgiving Break	
14	Nov 29 – Dec 6	The Future of Capital Punishment & Closing the Investigation	<u>Due before class on Tuesday:</u> <u>Watch:</u> Reform as Response: Why the Death Penalty Changes without Being Abolished (3 pts) Illinois, Innocence, and Executive Restraint: How Moratoria Became Politically Possible (2 pts) From Illinois to Washington: Federal Commutation as Executive Restraint (2 pts) The Future of the Death Penalty: Legitimacy, Disuse, and Managed Survival (3 pts) <u>SUBMIT:</u> Final Investigative Case File (100 pts)	<u>TUESDAY:</u> Presentation Days <u>THURSDAY:</u> Presentation Days



Week	Dates	Topics & Cases	Readings / Materials	Tuesday/Thursday Activities
			Final Investigation Briefing (50 pts)	

Note: This is a tentative schedule, and subject to change as necessary – monitor the course page for current deadlines. In the unlikely event of a prolonged university closing, or an extended absence from the university, adjustments to the course schedule, deadlines, and assignments will be made based on the duration of the closing and the specific dates missed.